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ABSTRACT

Of all the methods and techniques arising from research in human communication that are subsequently used in counseling, the one most seldom mentioned in counseling literature is that of persuasion. The word persuasion is often wrongly used as a synonym for manipulation, an activity counselors are trained to avoid in working with clients. Verbal persuasion can be explored from the point of view that it is inherent in human communication and in the counseling process, and that its use is a direct method for helping the client change attitudes and behaviors. The counselor who understands persuasion and manages it properly will not be overly concerned when it occurs in counseling sessions. Within the context of counseling as a helping profession, it remains the counselor's responsibility to influence the persuasion process in such a way that the client achieves desired change in attitude, behavior, or skill level. To be persuasive, the counselor first interacts openly as a human being while keeping the client's welfare as the priority. Finally, the counselor relies upon his or her own ability to persuade through knowledge, understanding, and insight. One of the consequences of human communication in this context is that when the counselor accepts persuasion as a legitimate method of helping, he or she can evaluate interaction from the perspective of communication strategy and from the perspective of therapeutic interventions. (LLL)

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Abstract

This article offers an assessment of the ways in which persuasion/social influence enters into the counseling process. In this context, persuasion/social influence is viewed as a natural function of human communication and as a legitimate method for the counselor to use in helping the client. The article illustrates some of the ways the client and the counselor participate in persuasive communication behavior as they come together in the counseling encounter. The concept of the hidden agenda is analyzed from the perspective of the persuasion/social influence model, followed by suggestions for methods the counselor can use to help manage persuasive communication throughout the counseling process.

Persuasion in the Counseling Process

Of all the methods and techniques arising from research in human communication that are subsequently used in counseling, the one most seldom mentioned in counseling literature is that of persuasion. The probable reason for this is that the word persuasion is often wrongly used as a synonym for manipulation, an activity counselors are trained to avoid in working with clients. As a result, those counseling activities involving legitimate persuasion are often described euphemistically or metaphorically in the literature to appear unrelated in any fashion to the practice of client manipulation. This article explores verbal persuasion from the point of view that it is inherent in human communication and in the counseling process, and that its use is a direct method for helping the client change attitudes and behaviors.

Typically, the literature suggests that the counselor give "advice" to the client so as not to invade upon the client's own resources for decision-making (Pietrofesa, Leonard, and Van Hoose, 1978). Ironically, this advice-giving by the counselor may contribute to communication barriers by making the client defensive (Patterson and Eisenberg, 1983). Such watered-down references to the process of persuasion serve to confuse both the client and the counselor

by creating a dishonest atmosphere in which the participants have to ignore the fact that persuasion is occurring.

Ostman (1987) sees the goal of persuasion as providing new or different values that are more rewarding than those currently held. Such a goal could equally be applied to counseling in that the counselor helps the client explore alternatives and develop skills necessary to bring about desired change. "Persuasive Argument Theorists" feel that persuasion takes place when individuals are exposed to arguments or ideas that they themselves had not thought of at the time. Our role as counselors is to provide those options (Gouran,1990). Persuasion remains an integral part of this process of change through which one human being helps another.

Persuasion and its Etiology

In the technical sense, persuasion is defined as the co-creation of a state of identification or alignment between a source and a receiver that results from the use of symbols (Larson, 1979, p. 7). The important ingredient in this definition is the term "co-creation," which reflects the notion that persuasion involves a two-way exchange between message sender and receiver. The effects of persuasion rest in the volitions, thoughts, and behaviors of the receiver, but the

purpose of the persuasion remains a matter of the sender's intention (Ross, 1985). The exchange of information in purposeful persuasion is framed within the context of human interaction.

Because persuasion involves the two-way flow of information, it suggests that persuasion occurs only with the receiver's "permission." Although this is a valid point, other variables enter into the process. For example, susceptibility to persuasion is related to assertiveness; non-assertiveness implies that one allows others to make decisions for him or her (Haney and Boenisch, 1982), a practice which is an expression of susceptibility. Self-image also helps determine one's susceptibility to persuasion. Fisher (1981) shows that people with low self-esteem arising from recent failures generally are more vulnerable to persuasion in simple message forms. This may be related to the idea that depression is closely linked to feelings of loss and hopelessness (Brown, 1978). This susceptibility may be exploited by others. Burgoon and Bettinghaus (1980) mention that personal threats may be used to enforce persuasion and Deturck (1987) presents evidence that violence is often used as a compliance-gaining strategy when verbal persuasion fails.

Bradley and Stone (1983), commenting on the behavior of children, mention that behavior is displayed for a purpose and not as the result of a cause. Something like this occurs when the client tries to use persuasion as a coping

mechanism by convincing others that life-events should be interpreted in a particular way. In this manner the client persuades himself or herself that life and its problems are manageable. In other words, the client copes through self-persuasion arising from successful persuasion of others.

Such behavior can be seen in counseling in the form of the "manipulative" client who persuades the counselor to define a situation in a specific manner. Although the client should not be blamed for utilizing persuasion as a coping mechanism, the counselor who is persuaded by such behavior may respond by giving the client feedback that reinforces the persuasive story. As Church (1966) observes, people try to find settings that support pleasing and coherent self-images. This is exactly the sort of behavior that often characterizes the manipulative client. It is as if the client is sending up a "trial balloon" version of reality to see if it will persuade the counselor and thereby help the client maintain the current self-image. With such a client, an obvious goal of counseling would be to help him or her use other reality tests besides manipulative success.

Yalom (1980) views the therapeutic process as the client moving from isolation into a real relationship, a relationship which is itself the healer. This idea echoes that of Rogers (1961); good communication is good therapy. The healing relationship comes about through communication, much of which is persuasive in nature. Unfortunately, communication is not always easy to achieve;

the client may have neither the skills nor the inclination to communicate with the counselor. For example, as the result of a recent study of communication apprehension (CA), Beatty (1987) concludes that those who are apprehensive may avoid whenever possible those situations requiring communication. Miller (1987) sees a similar phenomenon with communication reticence in that as reticence increases, expectations of success in communication situation decreases. In terms of counseling, this means that the client may try to avoid communicating altogether or that he or she may expect less from possible communication as his or her non-communication continues.

The counselor often tries to overcome this kind of reluctance by being open and by self-disclosing. Although there is evidence that the self-disclosing counselor will be viewed more favorably by the client (Peca-Baker and Friedlander, 1987), self-disclosure does not in itself establish client-counselor communication. The client's ability to control feelings is linked to his or her verbal resources for thematizing them. In other words, the client cannot verbalize feelings unless he or she has the mental and communication skills to turn feelings into words.

Other clients may have particular communication needs, some of which suggest states of dependency. For example, depressed clients may ask for more informational and emotional support prior to decision-making (Coyne, Aldwin,

and Lazarus, 1981). Additionally, some clients may be willing to communicate, but as a result of depression, be less able to express themselves (Laughlin, 1967). Snyder (1963) shows that dependency can manifest itself in a variety of ways. The client may ask for counselor advice, reassurance, excessive support, or even for specific decisions to be made. It is reasonable to suspect that persuasion is one vehicle by which depression evolves into dependency or by which dependency is reinforced. Persuasion in such an instance is best viewed as a coping mechanism, albeit a maladaptive one.

The client who is "stressed-out" or depressed may find it difficult to focus attention and to identify internal resources for coping. It may simply be easier to convince others to make decisions and to take action. The depressed client who has trouble expressing himself or herself, may be using the persuasive power of silence or hesitancy to enlist the counselor's energy to cope. Such behavior may not be backed by conscious intent or malice; it is simply that the client needs help and uses persuasion to get it. The counselor must recognize that such behavior blocks the very relationship which would be most productive for the client.

Unfortunately, if the term manipulation is used to label the client, the counselor's focus may shift to the judgmental quality of the term without regard for the communication strategy that the client is using, the same strategy that may be creating the problems which counseling seeks to solve. Rogers (1961) sees this

tendency to judge as the major barrier to interpersonal communication. The barrier comes into being in this instance as the counselor adopts a protective communication strategy to protect himself or herself from manipulation and persuasion, a very human reaction. However, in doing so the counselor may cease to offer the client openness and self-disclosure, with the result that the client remains even more distant from the authentic, healing relationship.

Persuasion and the Hidden Agenda

Hidden agenda is another euphemism for persuasive behavior. It refers to the kind of persuasion that occurs when one person intends to persuade without the other participant's knowledge. For the counselor, the hidden agenda is a more important issue because it ultimately involves counselor ethics. Like persuasion in general, the hidden agenda can be seen as a communication strategy and as a coping mechanism. However, inherent in the term is the unstated potential for exploitation; the counselor may assume that the client seeks only to manipulate and exploit the counselor. The counselor with a hidden agenda, on the other hand, may manipulate and exploit the client by arranging therapy to fulfill that agenda.

The hidden agenda may be cultural or political (Szasz, 1987), economic (Weiss, 1987), personal, or professional. Dreyfus and Nikelly (1971) mention that

some therapists keep a "professional" distance from the client for fear of involvement and then call the client "resistant" if he or she fails to interact under such conditions. When the counselor uses a particular counseling approach, he or she is convincing the client that the approach is the best one, the one most likely to bring change or relief. Jourard (1971) claims that orthodox therapists are more concerned with verification of dogma than with knowing and responding to their clients as individual persons. This idea is akin to that of Barton (1973) who states that the ordered structure brought to the counseling encounter by the advocate of a traditional approach has already been affected by the prejudgments of the therapist's narrow orientation. For example, for a client to be helped by an approach such as transactional analysis, he or she must first be persuaded that such things as structured ego states actually exist. That is, he or she must be convinced that, among other things, the assumption that ego states exist in all people (Harris, 1969) is a correct one. The counselor, too, must be persuaded that the assumption is valid.

In a general sense it appears as though all approaches to counseling have hidden agendas built into them. However, their persuasive content is meant to work for the client. Only individual counselors can misuse this content in a manipulative fashion to validate his or her own belief system. Theories often evolve to correct such tendencies. Smith (1987), for example, attempts to resolve

the relative coldness of behaviorism by calling for the restoration of concepts such as person, self, and identity to the analysis of attitude change. Arbuckle (1965, p. 51) addresses this issue by stating that, "The professional counselor, however, when thinking about goals must be thinking in terms of a client satisfaction, not counselor satisfaction." A strong argument could be made here that eclectic approaches to counseling help reduce hidden agendas because the practitioner has less vested interest in proving the validity of theory.

The client, of course, may also bring a hidden agenda to the counseling encounter. Latner (1974) mentions that the act of talking can serve as a substitute for experience by separating the speaker from the experiential context. This behavior constitutes a hidden agenda when the client uses language to hide from experience. In group counseling, for example, some participants may appear deceitful, game-playing, and manipulative. They "figure out" what others expect and try to meet those expectations (Corey and Corey, 1982). From the perspective of persuasion, such a strategy means that the user copes by hiding behind language and verbosity.

Another common hidden agenda is helplessness. A client may resort to this strategy because he or she actually feels helpless and cannot cope. Or the strategy may relieve the client from personal responsibility by leading others to assume responsibility for decision-making. If the helper fails to assume the

responsibility, he or she may be labeled cruel and unfeeling by the client (Kopp, 1976). Such labeling can be very persuasive because it is the last thing most counselors want to hear. In this instance, the aim of the strategy is to make the counselor doubt his or her own motives and abilities in such a way that he or she "buys into" the client's verbal reality. In essence, the client accuses the couselor of having a hidden agenda manifested as an unwillingness to give the client what he or she wants.

When such a client is labeled manipulative because all behavior seems to be aimed at getting the counselor to do something he or she does not want to do, the counselor, as mentioned above, may react by withdrawing. But the act of labeling a client as manipulative can be regarded as a type of withdrawal in itself. It is as if the counselor is saying that the client is not a real client, but a manipulative imitation. The counselor's displeasure with such a client may center on the issue of personal power. The counselor may feel that the client has the power to get him or her to act in a specific way and may feel forced to be constantly "on guard" against such power. Or the client's power may conflict with the counselor's own need for power, thus creating a complex communication situation in which two hidden agendas oppose one another.

If the counselor does not see the client's communication as manipulative and accepts the projected reality, he or she may be assisting the client in

avoidance behavior. Patterson and Eisenberg point out that the counselor who behaves this way actually helps the client aviod responsibility and may do so to fulfill his or her own needs, instead of those of the client. In this kind of counseling situation, the counselor may be unaware that anything is amiss. The counselor, in his or her eagerness to help, lowers his or her resistance to persuasion by thinking that the client's needs are being met. The persuasive client, in constrast, has accurately identified and targeted a need of the counselor.

Interventions

At this point it should it should be noted that the effective counselor is also the persuasive one. Or put another way, a counselor cannot be effective unless he or she is also persuasive. But the question remains as to how the counselor should use persuasion to help the client without falling victim to some hidden agenda? A partial answer is to be found by examining ways in which persuasion may be managed within the context of counseling interventions.

Counseling psychologists are involved with influencing the ways in which a client behaves, the attitudes they portray and their values and views of the world (Corrigan, et. al., 1980). Strong (1968) finds that clients are persuaded to alleviate their dissonance much more rapidly when the counselor emits an aura of

trustworthiness, is seen as an expert, is surrounded by an environment that is conducive to change and is attractive. Whenever these conditions exist, it becomes more difficult for the client to discredit the counselor and the client conditions. This social influence model of counseling is persuasive in that the client can allow themselves more ego involvement due to perceived counselor credibility.

Kerr, Clairborn, and Dixon (1982) identify expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as those qualities perceived by others as contributing to persuasiveness. A problem arises, however, about how these perceptions are to be utilized. The counselor who focuses attention on these would-be traits as if they were counseling techniques, introduces yet another hidden agenda into the counseling encounter. The counselor may become so involved in being persuasive that he or she forgets that the client is there for reasons other than providing feedback about persuasive messages. The counselor may manipulate the client into thinking that counseling is supposed to evolve in such a manner.

Bandler and Grinder (1979) observe that there are no mistakes in human coummunication; there are only outcomes. One such outcome of the counselor's persuasive communication with the client is that if the counselor does it in a manipulative manner, he or she damages the client and the counselor's own integrity through self-manipulation. Additionally, the counselor who uses

manipulation as a mere technique of behavioral change without regard for the "self" of the client, turns the persuasion process into a technique of nonmeeting and control (Laing, 1967).

There are, however, some specific measures the counselor can take to help prevent the misuse of persuasion with the client. He or she can use language to share experience and let the inherent persuasiveness of that act carry the therapeutic message. He or she can be as self-aware as possible to guard against the tendency to project values to others (Brammer, 1985). Or he or she can assume the role of teacher to help the client change attitudes or skills to better deal with self and world (Combs, Avila, and Purkey, 1971).

However, the most far-reaching method the counselor can use to control persuasion is self-disclosure. Jourard calls the professional counselor the professoinal inviter of self-disclosure and suggests that self-disclosure produces similar behavior in the client. Cormier and Cormier (1985) consider self-disclosure as the generating agent for an open and facilitative counseling atmosphere. Self-disclosing means the counselor exhibits his or her own willingness to engage in open interaction with the client so the healing relationship mentioned earlier can take place. Through self-awareness, the counselor guards against a personal hidden agenda and interacts with openness. Put another way, the counselor relaxes his or her defenses against persuasion and thus shows the

client that it is safe for him or her to do the same. Self-disclosure carries the persuasive message that the counselor, too, is a human being, one capable of interacting for the sake of shared experience. Such a message conveys a non-judgmental attitude and can free the client to explore problems. This freedom forms the basis for sharing the client's private world, an activity highly recommended by Rogers (1965). If that private world hinges upon manipulation of others, the counselor can intervene by helping the client recognize this point and by helping him or her move toward self-actualization (Shostrom, 1967).

Essentially, the counselor manages his or her own persuasiveness through personal attitudes, values, and behaviors that focus priority on client welfare. The counselor should recognize that any knowledge, understanding, insights, or empathy he or she possesses has persuasive potential. For this reason codes of counselor ethics insist upon directing all counseling activities toward client welfare. Through ethical practices, hidden agendas are minimized, the power to persuade is used therapeutically, and counseling an activity for personal growth. Persuasion is used pro-actively to help the client achieve the goals of counseling. For example, persuasion can be used as a process-technique to help the client overcome resistance to counseling. This method is described by Dixon (1987) as resting upon two ideas: 1) counselor authority and client trust, and 2) the therapist's belief that the client will be successful if he or she carries out the

counselor's wishes.

There is also a way to identify the client's persuasive attempts early in the counseling encounter. Ostman explains that explicit persuasion carries "markers" that are easily identified by message receivers. That is, the receiver of this sort of persuasion knows from life experience and from the language used that he or she is the target of persuasion. For example, the client who begins with, "Look at it this way . . .", is using persuasive language that is easily recognized. But implicit persuasion is more difficult to recognize. In counseling terms, implicit persuasion represents the hidden agenda; the receiver does not know that persuasion is the goal of the message sender. This implicit persuasion is most characterized by the lack of markers. In other words, implicit persuasion is most recognizable by the absence of any language clues.

The counselor can monitor the counseling encounter to detect the presence or absence of persuasion markers. Analysis of those discussions lacking markers can help the counselor identify attempts at persuasion. Identified attempts can then be treated as legitimate counseling issues and may lead toward the client's unstated problems. As the counselor spends more time with the client, he or she becomes "attuned" to the client's verbal behavior and may more easily recognize persuasive attempts through meta-analysis of overall communicaton behavior. Interventions aimed at reducing the client's manipulative behavior may then be

considered.

If the counselor suspects manipulative persuasion by the client, he or she can ask the question: What does the client want me to believe, think, or do and why? The answer will appropriately point to persuasive elements which the counselor can evaluate for therapeutic relevance. In managing persuasion in the counseling encounter, the counselor's primary goal is insuring that its use is confined to beneficial activities.

Conclusion

By now it should be apparent that there is no way for counseling to take place without persuasion. The counselor who understands persuasion and manages it properly will not be overly concerned when it occurs in counseling sessions. As a normal part of human communication, persuasion can function as a counseling tool like any other communication mode. Combs, Avila, and Purkey (1971), state that the helper determines the direction of the encounter by modeling, by pointing the way to productive paths, and by suppressing less profitable routes. These activities are inherently persuasive in nature and involve a two-way process that neither the client nor the counselor can avoid. If the client cannot or will not communicate, additional skill training may be needed before the two-way process

can develop. Additionally, the counselor needs to keep in mind that the client should not be labeled as manipulative merely becuase he or she tries to persuade.

Within the context of counseling as a helping profession, it remains the counselor's responsibility to influence the persuasion process in such a way that the client achieves desired change in attitude, behavior, or skill level. To be persuasive, the counselor first interacts openly as a human being while keeping the client's welfare as the priority. Finally, the counselor relies upon his or her own ability to persuade through knowledge, understanding, and insight. The degree to which such ability is helpful in problem-solving may be why the client seeks counseling in the first place. One of the consequences of human communication in this context is that when the counselor accepts persuasion as a legitimate method of helping, he or she can evaluate interaction from the perspective of communication strategy and from the perspective of therapeutic interventions.

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